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ABSTRACT

Although portfolios have gained acceptance in K-12 education, they have only recently been explored for inclusion in administrator-preparation programs. This paper describes the use of portfolios in the leadership-preparation programs at the University of New Mexico (UNM). The Ed.D program, which has been significantly modified to accommodate to the needs of experienced educational leaders, has been reconceptualized around the use of portfolios as an instructional element as well as an assessment device that replaces the traditional dissertation requirement. The paper also explores important issues of faculty support, assessment needs, and policy implications. The newly revised doctoral program in educational administration at UNM was launched during the summer of 1993. Some faculty resisted self-guided learning because it challenged their long-held beliefs and practices. Because portfolio assessment requires maintaining a continuous and meaningful focus, the department also grappled with developing genuine, relevant processes and structures. Portfolios are also not yet widely accepted by the university community and the College of Education. The paper concludes that portfolios are a major cornerstone of leadership-preparation programs because they promote reflection, transformational leadership, and syntheses of meaning. Portfolios provide an alternative to traditional programs that often fall short of such objectives. (LMI)

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PORTFOLIOS: POTENTIALS AND PROBLEMS FOR PREPARATION OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERS

American Association of School Administrators. 1996 Conference-Within-A-Conference Session on Performance Assessment of Future School Leaders

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Why portfolios? What purposes are associated with the development of such a document, particularly at the graduate level of preparation? Why is there such intensive interest in employing this tool to prepare educational leaders? Portfolios are being utilized across a wide range of purposes, from a supplementary description of learning activities, research projects, and professional practice, to actually standing in place of graduate theses and dissertations.

The bottom line is the growing awareness that portfolios, properly employed, can provide a comprehensive picture of what a graduate student is capable of doing, across a range of knowledge, skills, and beliefs. However, we are still in an early stage of understanding and development concerning portfolios. There is much to be learned, approaches to be tested, and improvements to be made if we expect to be persuasive about the effective uses of portfolios in graduate-level preparation of educational leaders.

At the University of New Mexico (UNM) the educational administration faculty has been experimenting with the use of portfolios in its leadership preparation programs for the

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past three years. Specifically, the Ed.D program, which has been significantly modified to accommodate to the needs of experienced educational leaders (e.g., intensive summer focus, weekends over the year, cohort-based, and problem focused learning) has been reconceptualized around the use of portfolios as an instructional element as well as an assessment device that replaces the traditional dissertation requirement. One cohort has completed the course of study while another is almost midway through it and a third is presently being recruited. More recently, based on the positive outcomes of the Ed.D experience, the faculty has made the decision to employ portfolios in the masters program.

In October of 1995 UNM sponsored a conference, "Surveying the Landscape of Portfolios," which focused on identifying where we are in this fledgling effort. The conference included faculty members from around the country, some of whom are on the present panel, as well as graduate students from UNM and other institutions. That conference has helped to further the dialog among those of us who see value in making the transition to portfolio-based educational leadership programs.

This paper summarizes UNM's experiences with portfolios in leadership preparation and explores some important issues that emerge from that experience. These issues include faculty support, assessment needs, and policy implications.

UNM' S PORTFOLIO-BASED PROGRAM

The newly revised Ed.D program in educational administration at UNM was launched during the summer of 1993. It was designed to be responsive to the scheduling problems and learning needs of highly experienced, mature educational leaders. These learners require maximum flexibility to identify and experience learning opportunities that are set within a broad framework of program purposes and domains. They are reflective, upwardly mobile practitioners who have the ability and desire to be involved in defining their own learning experiences.

Recognizing that these reflective leaders must be able to provide vision and direction, the program focuses on leadership requirements of educational systems. It is based upon the belief that traditional models, built around part-time study and randomly-taken courses, must be replaced with purposefully and logically-sequenced blocks of learning experiences. Further, the educational leaders who are students in the program must be encouraged to generate and disseminate practitioner-oriented knowledge. To do this, opportunities need to be provided for field-based problem focused learnings.

Portfolio Contents

The portfolio is viewed as a central vehicle to achieve these program beliefs. "A portfolio at the graduate level represents: 1) an extensive record of progress, 2) a collection of well-documented learning achievements, 3) an

overview of significant field experiences and observable applied research skills, 4) combined with regular statements of deep self-reflection, that can stand as a representative and accumulated body of comprehensive academic study and reflected learning. (UNM, Educational Administration Program, Guide to Portfolio Preparation, revised, April, 1995).

The contents of the portfolio, as employed in the program, include:

- An educational platform, or statement of educational philosophy and ideals;
- A plan that focuses on goals and aspirations of the candidate;
- A synthesis of applied research efforts initiated at work sites;
- Professional development activities beyond those encompassed in the program;
- Leadership activities during the duration of the program, with an emphasis on transformational efforts and outcomes;
- A capstone research project that is conducted during the last phase of the program and builds upon earlier applied research efforts.

Assessment Criteria

Candidates progress in the program, through courses and in the field is monitored and evaluated regularly. The portfolio is one vehicle employed in the process. Specifically, faculty base their evaluations on indicators

of:

- Movement towards professional goals;
- Evidence of practice of life long learning
- Evidence of extensive and intensive introspection; and
- Work that is thematic, providing for a basis of personal and professional growth, research focus, and work site improvement and/or transformational change;
- Parsimony and coherent, logical, persuasive discussion

Review Process

Students work with their committee members to establish the specific approach and content of the portfolio. Once agreed-upon, students stay in close contact with their major advisors who help guide the collection and display of the evidential base for the portfolio.

There are three formal portfolio review points as the student progresses through the program. The first review point comes when preliminary assessments (referred to as "the Mid-point Review") are held. Committee members are asked to provide detailed responses to the students' first portfolio draft. The second review point comes at the time of comprehensive assessments. Again, committee members provide detailed responses to the portfolio at this advanced stage of its development. Finally, the portfolio serves as the basis of the final assessment. At this time all faculty members, students, and others from the education community, are invited to share in the synthesis of meaning that has evolved in the portfolio effort.

FACULTY ISSUES

Faculty are not always supportive of major change to their curriculum or learning formats. This seems to be particularly true when referring to portfolios, which directly challenge their established practices and beliefs. For example, faculty have learned that dissertations are the ultimate tests of learning and achievement by doctoral candidates. Because of this it is not accidental that most programs that are experimenting with portfolios are also still straddling the academic fence by requiring candidates to complete dissertations as well as compile portfolios.

Further, many faculty members appear to be unprepared or unwilling to shift their thinking towards the student as a self-guided learner and away from the imagery of the student as an empty vessel to be filled up with our version of what you need to know.

In short, many faculty members have a long way to go to accept and incorporate basic adult learning principles that call out for self-guided learning into their instructional approaches. Unless we faculty members change our behaviors and beliefs portfolio development may be merely a shift in form rather than substance of graduate preparation. We have much to learn and then to practice concerning how mature students perceive, feel, and respond to learning.

ASSESSMENT-RELATED ISSUES

Being so new at the effort, most programs are

struggling with the development of genuine and relevant assessment processes and structures. It is as new and exotic to faculty members as it is to students, which makes the entire activity uncomfortable at best and agonizing at worst.

The importance of assessment cannot be overstated. Ultimately the portfolio must be evaluated if we and the students are going to be able to judge what they have learned from the effort and what they know and can do as a result of it. The promise of portfolios is that learnings can be contextualized within a sphere of institutional and community life. For this to happen, beyond being able to demonstrate what they know, students must be able to show how they can apply these learnings in ways that show promise of performance at a high level of competence in real and specific situations.

Assessment requires continuous and meaningful focus. It cannot be reserved for a single, final review at the end of a program of study. In some ways the process <u>is</u> the product--review, critique, modification, reflection, are part and parcel of the learning/demonstration/application growth curve.

The traditional form of a judgment, a letter grade, is not appropriate as an assessment device for portfolios. Being able to state our judgments along some form of known criteria is a challenge. Our assessments of portfolios will likely continue to be subjective because they deal with

important, complex, and holistic phenomena. We have much to learn about making these assessments consistent, realistic and meaningful.

POLICY-RELATED ISSUES

In the best case scenarios faculty and students may understand the concept of portfolios, agreed-upon structures and processes may be established to manage the process effectively, and assessment procedures may be clear, relevant and operational. However, there still remains a major hazard that will have to be confronted: pioneering preparation programs must convince university policy makers that the portfolio approach is appropriate and acceptable.

Degree requirements are established within the larger context of a university's belief system and rule structure. Any new programmatic proposal runs a major gauntlet of check points in the form of university review processes. When it involves legitimizing something as unique and different as portfolios as a major element of a program's design, the hazards confronted can increase exponentially.

The most difficult barriers are proving to be put up within colleges of education themselves. Our colleagues may recognize the value of the portfolio approach but they also tend to fear that they may also be challenged to consider this approach if they accept it as an alternative to the traditional dissertation approach by one of the program units. Units that need to petition committees of

colleagues to get approval for portfolio-based programs will have to work hard to cultivate support and ally fears that may be triggered.

Experience gathered thus far supports this concern. In fact, university-wide graduate committees may be less of an obstacle, particularly if the petition is for an Ed.D program rather than a Ph.D program. The Ed.D is often looked at by these bodies as outside their purview, or at least outside their central area of concern, as something unique to colleges of education and not to be taken as seriously as the Ph.D. Still, program developers will have to cultivate support on the part of university-wide policy makers, help these officials understand purposes and procedures of such programs, and help them establish criteria for judgment of the students' portfolios when they are put forth to the university for final approval.

An additional policy consideration that will likely emerge has to do with work load considerations. Many faculty members view guidance of a portfolio as more time consuming than guidance of a dissertation. Accumulating evidence supports this contention, suggesting that it will likely lead to pressure to reconfigure work loads of faculty members. In this era of reduced resources, this may lead to difficulties in the future.

IN CLOSING

While portfolios have gained a solid beachhead in K-12 settings, they are just now being widely explored for inclusion in higher education programs, and most recently for their value in graduate-level preparation. This is a time of experimentation and modification. Those of us who have been involved in the process are sufficiently enthused to continue and expand the experiment as learnings accrue. Because we are in the business of preparing leaders for educational organizations it is incumbent upon us to offer programs that "fit" preparation requirements. We believe that portfolios are a major cornerstone of such programs because they promote reflection, transformational leadership, and syntheses of meaning. Because traditional programs often fall far short of such objectives we must continue to learn from our experiences and develop portfolio-based programs that are effective.